

Department of Health and Human Services

**OFFICE OF
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**Child Support Enforcement
State Satisfaction Survey**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

To determine State child support agencies' level of satisfaction with the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement and to identify opportunities to improve its services to the States.

BACKGROUND

The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) requested that we survey States to determine their experiences and satisfaction with OCSE and to identify any areas for improvement. This survey was one of the action items identified in a recently completed national Strategic Plan for the Child Support Enforcement Program.

The Child Support Enforcement Program was established in 1975 under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act. The goal of this program is to ensure that children are financially supported by both parents; it is administered at the State level and overseen Federally by OCSE. The OCSE has its central office in Washington D.C. and 10 regional offices throughout the country.

We conducted 54 structured telephone interviews in October and November 1997 with respondents from all 50 States, as well as the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands. In most cases, we spoke to the child support program director. We asked respondents to differentiate their answers between the central and regional offices for most questions. We have also selected six States for on-site visits and will present these case studies in a separate follow-up report.

FINDINGS

Most States Are Satisfied Overall

Forty-seven States are very or somewhat satisfied with OCSE's central office, while seven are somewhat dissatisfied. Similarly, 49 States are very or somewhat satisfied with their regional OCSE office, with only five being somewhat dissatisfied. A majority of States say their satisfaction with OCSE has increased over the past 2 years; 44 say it has increased with the central office and 28 say it has increased with the regional office.

States Rate Their Recent Experiences High

States rate overall communication within the Child Support Enforcement Program high, with 44 saying it is very good or good. More specifically, three-quarters say communication with the central office is very good or good and more than three-quarters say it is very good or good with the regional office. Furthermore, most States (37) rate overall coordination in the program as very good or good; at least two-thirds give this high rating to their coordination with both the central and regional offices.

A majority of States also give high ratings to their most recent contacts with both the central and regional offices, although ratings are somewhat higher for the latter. Three-quarters are satisfied with the accessibility, availability, and responsiveness of OCSE staff, as well as with the timeliness, helpfulness, and accuracy of the assistance they received.

Communication, coordination, and recent contacts are related to States' overall satisfaction. As States' ratings of each of these decrease, States' overall satisfaction with OCSE declines.

Additionally, nearly all States have asked OCSE for support over the past year, including help with new and existing policies, systems, and demonstration projects. The majority (at least two-thirds) say the help they received from OCSE was very good or good.

States Believe OCSE Works With Them As Partners

Half of the States believe the Child Support Enforcement Program is a true Federal/State partnership most of the time, and another quarter say it is a partnership some of the time. They say the increased emphasis on Federal and State partnership has greatly improved the program. Also, States believe the central office provides strong program expertise and leadership.

Some Regional Offices Are Rated Higher Than Others

While States rate some regional offices high, others receive mixed ratings. States which are more satisfied with their regional office value the State-specific support and commitment they get from these offices. On the other hand, States which are less satisfied with their regional office say they receive limited support, or that communication and coordination are weak.

States Offer Specific Suggestions For Improving Their Relationship With OCSE

States offer several suggestions which would increase their satisfaction with OCSE. Perhaps most importantly, many States say OCSE should improve the timeliness of communication with them. They also believe OCSE should strengthen the regional office role to give them stronger program support; some say this role is not adequately defined, and others believe the regions lack authority. Other States say communication with States further away from the central office can be improved. States would also like OCSE to provide more systems support, training and practical support, including enhanced appreciation of their problems with new child support initiatives and more detailed advice on how to implement regulations. Finally, States suggest continued improvement of the audit process and a more timely Annual Report to Congress.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this report shows that States give OCSE high marks for its performance, particularly in recent years. But opportunities to improve remain, and the office should consider the suggestions cited by States to further improve its performance. By adopting a philosophy of customer service, OCSE has not only enhanced its support to the States, but also enriched the program as a whole.

COMMENTS

We received comments on the draft report from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Assistant Secretary for Management and Budget (ASMB). The ACF believes the States' suggestions are pertinent and noted some of its efforts to work with the States to address them. Some parts of the report were modified in response to ASMB's technical comments.

The full comments are presented in Appendix B.